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Introduction

Classroom presentations are an undeniably important part of the educational process. Indeed, virtually every lesson a teacher gives can be said to be a kind of presentation or at least contain a presentation component. As a result, students spend a great deal of their time in school listening to presentations. Academic literature supports the idea that making speeches has multiple benefits including increased confidence, improved reasoning, better memory, improved writing, reading and listening skills as well as an improvement in ability to communicate (Edwards 1998; Nunn 2005).

In recent years, as part of an increasing movement toward collaborative learning and learner autonomy, students everywhere are more frequently giving presentations themselves and listening to peers’ presentations. Combine these educational trends with advances made in presentation software and one might expect that presentation quality has also improved dramatically in recent years. Despite the difficulty in empirically defining what a good presentation is, most observers would agree that presentation quality has not measurably improved. On the contrary, many observers believe that presentation quality has dropped partly as a result of over-reliance on technology like presentation software. James Gleick, author of The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood, has gone so far as to call the PowerPoint presentation the “demon of information overload” (2011). There is an even more well-known and depressing expression that hints at the prevalent problems of PowerPoint or Keynote presentations. “Death by PowerPoint.” This expression refers to presentations in which the presenter just reads from the slides, presentations that are too long and complex, presentations that include too much text on each slide or presentations that make excessive use of software bells and whistles. Clearly there is room for improvement and, considering how much time both teachers and students spend either giving or listening to presentations, it can’t come soon enough.

Pecha kucha

Many Japanese would perhaps be surprised to find that the expression 「ぺちゃくちゃ」(Pecha kucha), which means “idle chitchat” or “yakkety yak” in Japanese, has become almost as well known around the world as Japanese words such as “tsunami” and “tycoon.” However, Pecha kucha interestingly has a different meaning in English than it does in Japanese. To most non-Japanese familiar with the term, “Pecha kucha” refers to a unique style of presentation. Pecha kucha is a presentation format using either PowerPoint or Keynote software in which a presenter speaks while twenty images are shown to the audience for exactly twenty-seconds each. The speaker has no control over the speed of the image forwarding...
as the images forward automatically after twenty-
seconds. The speaker talks in sync with the
images. Twenty images playing automatically for
twenty-seconds before moving on to the next slide makes for a presentation of exactly six
minutes and forty-seconds. The spirit of Pecha
kucha is that the images should support the
speaker’s message. The message is not there to
explain what you can see. The image should not
be too distracting. This is what the term “Pecha
kucha” means to the overwhelming number of
non-Japanese who are familiar with the term. In
the next section of this paper I will explain how
Pecha kucha got its start and why so many
people around the world have come to know the
expression.

Origins

The Pecha kucha presentation format was
created by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Klein
Dytham architecture in Tokyo, Japan. They came
up with the format after listening to one too many
fellow architects drone on and on endlessly during
a presentation. Klein and Dytham wanted to force
speakers to distill their presentations down to the
absolute bare minimum; saying and showing only
what is necessary while cutting out all superfluous
information. Living in Tokyo and being familiar
with Japanese they chose to use the expression
“Pecha kucha” as the name of their presentation
technique as an ironic way to express their
disdain for overlong, boring presentations in which
the speaker prattles on endlessly. Pecha kucha
presentations are necessarily fast-paced and
concise, allowing architects, designers and other
professionals to show their work and exchange
ideas efficiently and productively.

The idea proved so intuitive and the brief
presentations so appealing that it spread like
wildfire. From its start in Tokyo, Pecha kucha
presentations spread first to Europe and then
to North America and eventually around the
world. Rather than individual presentations, a
large impetus for the spread of Pecha kucha as a
presentation style was specially organized events
with numerous presenters in one night held in
various cities. The Pecha kucha presentation
events have become social occasions allowing
a number of people from diverse fields to get
together and take turns presenting on anything
that suits their fancy. Without a theme the only
commonality is that all presentations are the
same length, twenty slides playing for twenty-
seconds for a total of six minutes and forty
seconds per presentation. My introduction to
Pecha kucha was a presentation night held at
the K-Mix radio station in Hamamatsu, Japan in
August 2008.

As a language teacher I immediately started
thinking about how I could incorporate this
exciting new presentation style into my classroom
by having students do Pecha kucha presentations
in class and using Pecha kucha myself to help
achieve my teaching objectives. In the next part
of this paper, I will outline some specific ways in
which teachers can have their students use the
Pecha kucha presentation style in the classroom.

Student Presentations

The restricted length of a Pecha kucha
presentation is well-suited to adaptation for
students to do in-class presentations. The spirit
behind Pecha kucha is what Garr Reynolds refers
to as “restrictions as liberators” (2007). A
presentation of longer than six minutes and forty-
seconds is often undesirable for pedagogical
reasons. The longer a speech is, the greater
the likelihood of a significant lexical gap opening
up between what the presenter knows and what
the listener knows or can understand. Not to
mention that a longer speech can often quickly
become boring and cause listeners to “tune
out.” Indeed, consideration of the listeners,
usually a classroom of peers, is an important
reason to limit presentations to Pecha kucha
length. Even a captive audience of ostensibly
uninterested classmates may be expected to
pay attention and stay alert through a series of
interesting and engaging six minute and forty-
second presentations in which slides change
automatically every twenty-seconds.

Teachers, of course, can and do use various
techniques to enforce attention during speeches
such as having classmates evaluate their peer’s
presentations, quizzing them on content, or doing
cloze exercises among other things. However,
rather than having to impose artificial methods to
enforce student attention, a teacher may prefer,
at least on occasion, that students sit, listen
and enjoy their classmates brief and interesting
presentations without having to “do” anything
explicit.

The pre-determined length of Pecha kucha
presentations can make the normally daunting
idea of doing a presentation, especially in a foreign language, slightly less intimidating. The nature of the format requires students to practice and practice to refine their message. As each slide is only twenty seconds, it allows students to practice it easily. Twenty seconds broken down into a few sentences is a nice chunk of language to learn. Only twenty seconds per slide also means that the message has to be very concise. Students are forced to focus on the language content leading to sharper, higher-quality presentations.

Practicing for a speech of any length allows students time to work on their pronunciation and intonation. This is perhaps especially true of Pecha kucha presentations due to the structure the strict time limit imposes. Knowing that speaking time is limited and that English is a stress-timed language students can practice accenting the correct words. In English, the words stressed are the content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) and the unstressed words are function words (pronouns, articles, prepositions). Practicing a Pecha kucha speech and learning how to naturally stress content words can help students come ever closer to achieving natural-sounding “connected speech.” Indeed, as Celce-Murcia, et al. have noted, “stress, rhythm, and adjustments in connected speech can be easily overlooked in the language classroom. Nonetheless, these invisible signals are among the main clues used by listeners to process incoming speech and are thus of primary importance in the speech communication process” (1996). Winston Churchill once claimed that, “for every minute of speaking I spend at least one hour of preparation.” If students follow the same rule and practice a Pecha kucha speech for six to seven hours before presenting the speech, they can reasonably be expected to achieve better connected speech.

Another important benefit of Pecha kucha, as pointed out by Françoise and Roger Nunn, is that students who are normally shy and “reluctant in the classroom, when given time to prepare often demonstrate abilities in their speeches which are not revealed in other classroom activities” (2005). Missing the opportunity to exploit these abilities would be a shame indeed. Shy and somewhat reticent students may often evince an attention to detail and desire for preparation that may be a drawback during more free-form conversational classroom activities but serve them well in preparing and presenting in the classroom.

Perhaps the most practical reason to have students do short speeches in class is that it is a skill transferable to many real-world contexts. In the course of the average working-life many, if not most, people will be called upon at one time or another to present information to others in a meeting or other workplace context. Knowing the Pecha kucha technique and being comfortable making presentations within its confines can be a valuable workplace asset. Consider again for a moment that the reason the creators of the Pecha kucha format came up with the technique was out of frustration and boredom with long, uninteresting speeches. Being able to concisely, articulately and skillfully present important information to colleagues is a skill unlikely to be ignored by workplace superiors. After all, few would want to waste their valuable time sitting through a long and boring presentation when an experienced Pecha kucha presenter can say the same thing in six minutes and forty seconds.

In this section I have outlined some of the reasons why teachers may want to have their students do presentations in class. In the next section I will review a few of the reasons some researchers are opposed to students doing presentations in class. Space constraints preclude anything other than a brief rebuttal to those arguments.

The Wisdom of Student Presentations

As mentioned in the Introduction to this paper, research results support a number of valid pedagogical benefits to having students present in class. However, there are still many who debate the utility of having EFL students give speeches in class. Some researchers suggest that students may find the idea of oral presentations frustrating and intimidating. Students can easily be overwhelmed with the research and communication skills that are necessary for a successful presentation. As Jane King notes, “Some serious students who invest time and effort into an oral presentation do not always get the intended outcomes. Other students try to get through the ordeal as quickly as possible, but do not improve their speaking skills under such stressful situations. Thus oral presentations can be a time-consuming project with no guarantee of a satisfactory performance” (2002). An unsuccessful presentation can be a devastating blow to the confidence of anyone, as I can attest
to from personal experience. Even so, if a teacher sets achievable speech goals and with enough support and time to prepare, students should succeed. A successful presentation experience can result in a sense of accomplishment and increased confidence.

Another criticism questions the wisdom of using a large chunk of valuable and limited class time to have students work on presentations. The position is that classroom time should be spent on other tasks and if presentations are a part of the course they should be prepared completely outside of class. Knowing, however, that making presentations is a transferable skill applicable to many workplaces it seems reasonable to use lesson time to help students prepare for and practice their presentations. Although many university teachers often refuse to acknowledge it, a part of our jobs is to do our best to prepare students for the working world they will face after graduation.

Some researchers claim that students presenting in a second or foreign language are actually speaking on a topic about which they have only “artificial” knowledge (King, 2002). They have researched a topic and prepared a speech but, in reality, possess only a temporary command of the subject matter which is neither broad nor deep. The criticism is that students tend to just memorize blocks of language that they immediately forget. The fact is, however, that there is always someone who knows more about any given subject than any given presenter. In addition, teacher objectives regarding student speeches are often more holistic and less concerned with whether material is memorized or learned and enters a students “interlanguage” or not (Selinker, 1972). In terms of achieving my teaching goals, if the student can successfully present interesting content to an audience that finds it engaging and informative, their speech can be deemed successful.

Still another criticism alluded to previously is that there is often a significant lexical gap between the presenter and the audience which can greatly harm comprehension. The audience will rarely have the same store of background knowledge and schemata to draw upon when listening, as the presenter does when presenting. This criticism actually serves to encourage the use of Pecha kucha presentations as the visual and swift moving element of the presentation style is a perfect way to make material more understandable to the listener. The presenter can use slides and other techniques to help listeners bridge the gaps in their knowledge and maintain interest in the speeches.

Conclusion

Pecha kucha is an exciting new presentation style with many potential applications to the language learning class. It gives teachers another option in the classroom and ways to apply it are limited only by their own creativity. Of course, teachers need not stick religiously to the twenty images for twenty seconds format. Mini Pecha kucha, twenty images for ten seconds each, or ten images for twenty seconds each give you a presentation format of just over three minutes.
allowing up to twenty five students to present in a ninety minute lesson. The fact that Pecha kucha presentations were started in Japan by two non-Japanese and have spread throughout the world so rapidly and successfully clearly indicates that people everywhere appreciate short and visually engaging presentations. In future semesters, I will be exploring ways in which teachers, rather than rely on their students to present, can give their own Pecha kucha presentations in class to reach their instructional goals.

References


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